



TRANSFORMING AMERICA THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Bonner Scholars and Leaders are changing the world, one campus at a time. Despite a relatively small presence on each campus of between 30 and 120 students, the Bonner Scholars and Leaders are making an outsized impact. Through both program intent and implementation, students in the Bonner Program are leading a revolution through “Bonner Love,” a term they coined themselves to describe how their lives as college students are defined by service. Bonner Foundation president Robert (Bobby) Hackett has written that the phrase Bonner Love “spread throughout our network as a way of articulating who they are and what they do. They seek to emulate Martin Luther King’s goal of creating a beloved community that shows ‘understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies.’” Thanks to an extraordinary act of donor generosity and faith placed in these students, Bonner Love is indeed changing the world.

Building a Movement of Service Leaders

Since its experimental start at a single institution, according to Hackett, the Bonner Program has become “the largest privately-funded, service-based college scholarship program in the country,” now present on 66 campuses nationwide and engaging over 3,000 students each year. The scholarship targets high financial need students—85 percent are Pell-eligible, and one-third are first generation—and affords them the opportunity to serve 280 hours during the academic year, and another 280 hours through paid internships with nonprofit agencies during the summer.

Real estate developers recognize that lasting success requires much more than location, location, location. They also understand that building for enduring value requires the ability to leverage resources—financial and reputational, for starters—and, perhaps most of all, you need to engage trusted partners in your ambitious endeavors. Bertram F. Bonner (1899-1993) was a real estate developer who brought his considerable business acumen and his most trusted partner, his wife Corella, known as Billy, to his philanthropy pursuits. Bonner is credited with building more than 30,000 homes and apartments during his real estate career, leading to unimaginable success for someone who was born into poverty. Upon her marriage in 1942, Billy gave up her career in the hotel industry, but she never forgot her rural South roots and the poverty she experienced in the coal-mining towns of Appalachia.

Student leaders attend and represent their programs and campuses at the annual Bonner Congress Meeting.



BONNER SCHOLARS

Now in its third decade, the Bonner Program continues to grow with 3,000 active students and an alumni network exceeding 18,000 members. In 2018 a project was started to track the stories of Bonner Scholar and Leader lives after graduating from college; an initial set of [30 alumni profiles](#) shows the breadth and depth of their accomplishments. Bonner Scholars include:

- Bonner Scholar Hannah Gibbs, class of 2019 at Centre College in eastern Kentucky, who has led various efforts to address poverty and homelessness. She described in a campus publication that a culminating week-long initiative offers “a chance for our campus community to engage with our own values of servant leadership and global citizenship on an accessible scale for students, faculty, staff.” She said that “the week is designed so that everyone has a chance to learn, and everyone has a chance to teach.”
- Bonner Community Fellow Rainbow Chen, class of 2021 at Brown University in Providence, RI, is working with [Youth in Action](#), an after-school program for disadvantaged and underrepresented high school students. She is leading these students in an effort to tell the stories of residents living in a low-income, majority Hispanic neighborhood in “Humans of Providence.” She said in a campus profile that “this is not just a job for me. I am so lucky that I get to spend time with these youth who are going to make such a big difference in the world.”

In 1989, deciding to deploy his fortune to “displace despair with opportunity and help the person who is hurting,” Bertram Bonner turned to Wayne Meisel, a recent college graduate, to help him convert his aspiration into action. Bonner was impressed by what Meisel and his friend Bobby Hackett had accomplished since graduating from Harvard. Meisel and Hackett were leaders in a growing movement to engage college students in community service and had created the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) as a national vehicle for this purpose. COOL was the realization of their belief that “young people should be key leaders of a youth service movement.” They even produced a handbook, *Building a Movement: Students in Community Service*.

The Bonners were hands-on in the early days of their namesake foundation and were learning by doing. Initially, they focused on food insecurity, creating the Crisis Ministry Program, which continues to support anti-hunger organizations working in partnership with local congregations of all faiths. At the same time, Bertram Bonner and Wayne Meisel started to shape the vision of what would become the Bonner Scholars Program. Meisel coined a defining motto: “*Access to Education, Opportunity to Serve.*”

An Early Experiment

Through financial support for scholarships at Berea College, an institution in rural Kentucky known for its work-based learning model, and dialogue with Berea’s president, Bonner and Meisel considered the potential for including service-based work as a part of the institutional focus on work-based learning. What if a student’s work requirement in their financial aid package was replaced by community service work? What would be the impact on the student, the institution, and the community? With this focus on service, the Bonner Scholar Program was formally launched at Berea in 1990.

Pleased with the early Berea College student success stories, and impatient to grow impact, the foundation quickly expanded the Bonner Scholar Program to 11 other campuses the next year, and then 11 more in the second year, mostly supporting colleges in the Appalachian region, birthplace of Corella Bonner, and other schools in the South. Bonner was said to have believed in “fast nickels, versus slow quarters” to grow the program—in other words, provide small current-use dollars to test institutional interest, and then make larger, endowed gifts if a true commitment to student-led service was evident.

In 1992, Hackett, Meisel’s college friend and colleague at COOL, joined the Foundation as Vice President. Hackett was driven to “empower communities with the best thinking on how to tackle the problems they face” by engaging students as community-based researchers. He believed that given adequate support and training, students could “inspire and inform action in communities across the country.”

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Young people should be key leaders of a youth service movement.”

– WAYNE MEISEL

Students engage in training, discussion, and planning on key initiatives that can strengthen their Bonner Programs at the annual Bonner Congress Meeting.



Program Design

According to Hackett, “while the Bonner Scholars program targets high-need students, they are also recruited based on their commitment to making the world a better place, and that this is what defines them rather than their socio-economic background.” The Bonner Scholars are known as the “service stars,” and this campus identity “makes an enormous difference in how they experience college.”

The intensive, four-year developmental and cohort-based Bonner program model was in place from the outset in 1990. But the approach has been refined and expanded based on the first-hand experience of the students, staff, faculty, and community partners engaged in implementing it. The model emphasizes:

- **A Community Engagement Framework** that describes community partners (service providers, collaboratives, and campaigns), student roles with them (client service, service leadership, capacity-building, and social action) and the campus infrastructure required to guide the linkages among student, institution, and community.
- **Transformational Goals** that depict the units of change as concentric circles, moving from individuals and places to programs to organizations to systems.
- **A Four-Year Progression** that shows how time and resources adjust over a student’s college experience to enable him or her to develop as a service leader from a “personally responsible citizen” to a “participatory citizen” to a “social justice citizen.”

Each campus is responsible for supporting a Bonner Program director and coordinator. In turn, the Foundation staff ensure support and accountability through campus visits, resource development, national meetings, and professional development opportunities. To ensure consistency and cohesion across diverse higher education institutions, the individual Bonner Scholars are also bound together by the program’s Common Commitments: Community Building, Civic Engagement, Social Justice, Diversity, International Perspective, and Spiritual Exploration.

The funding model for the Bonner Scholars program is unusual and relies heavily on leverage. Twenty-one of the original 22 institutions support their respective cohorts of 30 to 100 Scholars through restricted endowments provided by the Bonner Foundation. A match of roughly four to one in foundation to institutional cash resources was required to establish the endowments, which now have a combined value of \$225 million, and support 1,500 students annually. Under the Bonner Endowment Agreements, the Bonner Foundation reviews fund usage on an annual basis to ensure full compliance with donor intent. Since 2009, an additional

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– BOBBY HACKETT

Bonner Scholars from Rhodes College celebrate their graduation.



45 schools have started the Bonner Program using a combination of Federal Work-Study and institutional funds. Six of these institutions have received Bonner Foundation endowment funding to support their Bonner Leader programs, which have a lower level of start-up and financial aid requirements.

Various national efforts were launched in the mid-1980's to encourage what has become known as service-learning, including efforts by Campus Compact and Youth Service America. During the 1990's, the creation of the federal Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the AmeriCorps Program provided financial aid support for students in the Bonner Program and the Learn and Serve Program. These Programs also allocated funding for service learning, including nine years of funding to a Bonner Foundation-led consortium that supported faculty to integrate community-based research into academic courses.

Higher education institutions interested in starting a Bonner Leaders Program are guided through a structured application process. Three to four new schools typically join each year. Foundation staff support them in developing strategies to recruit service-oriented students with financial need, provide service-based scholarships or stipends, and form deep community partnerships where students complete service and capacity-building projects. According to Hackett, the participating higher education institutions represent a growing “coalition of the willing and able.” With an “open source” approach to its knowledge, the foundation encourages those institutions that do not have the resources to join the Bonner network to adopt its philosophy and adapt its methodologies.

To better understand the effectiveness and multiple impacts of the Bonner Program, the Foundation funded a 10-year longitudinal study across 25 campuses in 2010. The Student Impact Study found that the Bonner Program model did contribute to student success, leadership development, and lifelong civic engagement. The Foundation has published this study and other articles and books that have contributed to the service-learning research base. In 2015, the Foundation celebrated the first 25 years of the Bonner Scholar Program with a special publication saluting its entire national network.

Campus Change, Program Continuity

Constancy and continuity in vision for a foundation's leadership over three decades has undoubtedly contributed to the steady evolution of the Bonner Program, despite inevitable change and succession on partner campuses. Following her husband's death in 1993, Billy Bonner took charge until her passing in 2002. She visited campuses throughout the growing Bonner Network, and brought her “firm handshake” and personal commitment to

service to all she met, especially the Bonner Scholars. Meisel described her interactions with Bonner Scholars as “spiritual, if not magical.” After 21 years in the founding leadership role, Meisel was succeeded as Bonner Foundation president by Hackett in 2010.

The values of founders Bertram and Billy Bonner also endure in the defining concepts and characteristics of the Bonner Program. They include recognizing service as a transformational act for students, campuses, and communities; promoting service by everybody, everyday; building the infrastructure to enable that service to become a common, student-led commitment; and encouraging a national learning community that collaborates to make best practice become common practice. Most of all, *Access to Education, Opportunity to Serve* remains the guiding principle for spreading Bonner Love.

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Photos: Bonner Foundation and
Stetson University

For more on Bonner Foundation
visit bonner.org.

This case study is one of 12 in a suite of case studies focused on how donors are supporting scholarships to create change. These case studies showcase the rich and varied narratives of giving in the scholarships space, giving insight to the philanthropy landscape and approach for foundations, academics, and practitioners.

The case studies have been developed in companionship with Candid's project [Scholarships for Change](#), a dynamic hub that pulls together data and knowledge to tell the story of how philanthropic dollars are supporting transformative scholarships. It includes a mapping tool and a repository of reports and case studies to learn from peers. The site was made possible through the generous support of The Ford Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Please visit scholarshipsforchange.org to explore further.

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